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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002471

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GAZA DISENGAGEMENT: SHARON FACING DEFEAT UNLESS

MAJOR -- UNEXPECTED -- TURNAROUND BEFORE SUNDAY

REF: TEL AVIV 2458

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: All Israeli polls are showing defeat for Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan at the hands of Likud party members. With little time left to campaign, and with the public's focus riveted on the Israeli basketball team's Saturday night final game for the European championship, Sharon has few available means of turning the numbers around. Sharon's chief of staff Dov Weissglas told the Ambassador April 30 that he attributes the plan's drop in support primarily to Likud voter apathy and vowed that Sharon has no intention of giving up even in the face of a referendum defeat. Polling data point to strong support among Likud members for Sharon personally, even by those who will vote against disengagement. The smell of blood is in the water for Sharon's rivals who may use this referendum to try to send Sharon into retirement. If the plan is voted down, Sharon has few options, none good. End summary.

Polls: Disengagement Plan Will Be Defeated

2. (C) Public and private polls conducted April 28 forecast defeat for PM Sharon's disengagement plan by margins of 51/43 percent and 46/38 percent. With less than 48 hours until the polls open, Sharon has few if any means of turning the vote around. He has already deployed doomsday warnings about the future of Likud, the economy and U.S. relations. The threat of Sharon's resignation, voiced by his son, Omri, has not swayed voters. Sharon's options are limited further by the fact that Israel's basketball team will play in the European Cup final game on Saturday night, meaning any last-minute media blitz by Sharon will fall on deaf ears. Interior Minister Avraham Poraz asked the Ambassador rhetorically during the April 29 semifinal basketball match, in which Israel beat Moscow in the presence of 10,000 cheering Israelis, most likely mainly Likudniks, "Wouldn't it have been smart if Arik (Sharon) had been here in the front row?"

3. (C) Dov Weissglas acknowledged to the Ambassador April 30 that: "We're clearly in a battle," and that "it is hard to judge the outcome." He said the plan had elicited strong support within Likud immediately after Sharon's April 14 meeting with the President, but since then supporters seemed to have become apathetic. Weissglas conceded that the opposition message, articulated by such disengagement foes as right-wing National Union MK Zvi Hendel, that the U.S. would walk away from its assurances had had a negative impact on some Likud voters. The PM's strategy, therefore, according to Weissglas, is to motivate apathetic but supportive voters by focusing on the potential costs of defeat. Weissglas stressed that even if the referendum fails, Sharon has no intention of abandoning his fight for disengagement.

Sharon Weakened

4. (C) Absent an unexpected victory on Sunday, Sharon will be a seriously weakened prime minister. Top Likud ministers -- Netanyahu, Shalom and Livnat -- have mouthed hollow and insincere support for his plan, refusing to campaign in favor. We have heard reports that Netanyahu has quietly told his camp not to support the plan. Sharon's rivals clearly smell blood in the water, and may be plotting to use the referendum not only to defeat Gaza disengagement but also to send Sharon into retirement. Sharon retains the support of his Shinui coalition partner, but Justice Minister Lapid has made clear his unhappiness that Sharon put the coalition's future into the hands of Likud's fractious voters.

Post-Vote Options

5. (C) If the plan is defeated, none of Sharon's options is good:

-- Submit the plan to the Cabinet. Echoing Weissglas, Sharon's political advisor Lior Horev told the press that Sharon will continue to push for disengagement, regardless of the results of the Likud referendum. The problem is that

defeat in the referendum could free Netanyahu, Shalom and Livnat from their earlier promise of support; and thus a Cabinet vote could also conceivably go against Sharon.

-- Submit the plan to a national referendum. This would require legislation that would be hard to pass, as Likud Knesset members would rightly see this as a repudiation of the party's vote.

-- Modify the plan. This would allow Sharon to argue that disengagement is alive, and could help him retain his seat; but he would find it difficult to secure Likud agreement to anything even remotely resembling the current, minimalist plan.

-- Accept defeat, ditch the plan, and try to govern: This would be unlike Sharon and probably not sustainable over time, as his weakened political position would continuously be exploited by rivals.

-- Resign. This would also be uncharacteristic, unless part of a plan to make a dramatic comeback in new national elections. Sharon publicly rejected this option several days ago ("I am not even considering such a possibility or thinking in such directions."). However, the polls show that Likud party members continue to give him high marks for leadership, even among those who will vote against disengagement. These polling numbers could contain the seed of a future Sharon political strategy.

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